

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Sociocultural Variables that Influence Policies in the Identification of Language Minoritized Students for Gifted Programs

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### Abstract

The United States has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of English Learners (ELs) enrolled in primary and secondary public schools over the last ten years. Despite this increase, ELs' representation in gifted and talented education programs remains disproportionately low. This review of 36 selections of literature on the topic explores how linguistic capital plays a role in the access to equitable educational programming for language minority students and the way that giftedness is conceptualized and defined in educational spaces. Findings illustrate how social factors and linguistic capital play a critical role in the access of language minoritized students to advanced academic programs, specifically gifted education programs.

### Keywords

academic access; English learners; equity; gifted education; linguistic capital

## INTRODUCTION

The disproportionate underrepresentation of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students in advanced academic education programs is a well-documented problem that the field of education has aimed to address for decades (NAGC, n.d.). By exploring how linguistic capital plays a role in access to equitable educational programming for language minority students, as well as how giftedness is conceptualized and defined in educational spaces, the following literature review makes the argument that linguistic capital—much like sociocultural and economic capital (Yosso, 2005)—plays a critical role in language minoritized students' access to advanced academic services, primarily gifted education programs in elementary education.

The first section of this work will provide an overview of how the 36 articles reviewed were selected. The second section will summarize the history and current context of how giftedness is defined and conceptualized within the existing K-12 U.S. public education system. A discussion of the varying protocols and practices will provide a transition to the third section of this literature review, wherein issues of equity and access are addressed in

relation to teachers' perceptions of English Learners' (ELs') academic potential and ability, along with how those play a role in CLED students' access to gifted education programs, advanced academic programs, and higher education. The fourth section of this paper will make a case for language serving as a form of capital and then provide an overview of how linguistic, sociocultural, and economic capital influence education policies. Finally, the fifth and final section of this paper will discuss the implications from this body of collected literature.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Definitions of giftedness in the United States have evolved since the early 20th century, when Lewis Terman established the use of IQ results from the Stanford-Binet intelligence test to identify students as either gifted or “dull” (Stark, 2014). A self-described eugenicist and prominent psychologist of his time, his definitions of giftedness and consequent identification protocols served to push forth their belief that low intelligence was directly correlated with being non-white and of non-middle/upper-class descent (Mansfield, 2016; Stark, 2014).

This disproportionate representation in gifted education programs has been well-documented (Ford, 2011; National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.; Wells, 2020) and exacerbates existing issues of lacking access to equitable educational opportunities. In response to these issues in representation, organizations focused on addressing gifted education issues have taken steps to work towards explicitly redefining giftedness with the aim of being more inclusive. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), a leading organization for gifted education, has updated their definition to read:

Students with gifts and talents perform - or have the capability to perform - at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential. Student with gifts and talents:

- Come from all racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, as well as all economic strata.
- Require sufficient access to appropriate learning opportunities to realize their potential.
- Can have learning and processing disorders that require specialized intervention and accommodation.
- Need support and guidance to develop socially and emotionally as well as in their areas of talent.
- Require varied services based on their changing needs (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.).

The updated definition from the NAGC makes more explicit its commitment to closing the identification gap. However, states and school districts are not required to implement this

definition, nor the much broader definition provided by the federal government for giftedness, which reads:

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2011).

The Virginia Department of Education is an example of a state that has chosen to adopt a definition that implements the general ideologies of the NAGC definition, but without the explicit commitment to closing the gap in identification discrepancies:

“Gifted students” means those students in public elementary, middle, and secondary schools beginning with kindergarten through twelfth grade who demonstrate high levels of accomplishment or who show the potential for higher levels of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment. Their aptitudes and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special programs to meet their educational needs (Commonwealth of Virginia, 2010).

### **Shared Goals**

The three definitions provided above show how definitions of giftedness have changed since the late 19th century, but also highlight a lack of consistency between organizations. When reading these definitions closely, it is evident that one aspect continues to be shared among all three provided definitions: a focus on academic aptitude and achievement. As such, gifted education programs often serve as another method of educational tracking.

### **Gifted as Educational Tracking**

Tracking (also called ability grouping) has occurred in the U.S. since the inception of public education but grew in popularity during the 19th century in an effort to increase the so-called efficiency of schools. This effort aimed to quickly address the perceived lack of knowledge of those who did not uphold patriotic American values, which included being white, speaking English, being affluent, and practicing Christianity (Ryan, 2020). This deficit-based approach to students’ foundational knowledge (Gay, 2018; García, 2009) who do not fulfill that checklist continues in schools in multiple ways. Gifted education programs that focus on the acceleration of academics manage to uphold structured inequality and systemic racism in a post-*Brown v. Board of Education* world through their “school within a school model” (Ryan, 2020, p. 39).

## **Multiple Tracking Programs**

Currently there are a variety of accelerated tracking programs in existence in U.S. public schools, a majority of which begin in middle school. The most commonly known programs include honors, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and magnet school programs (e.g., Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, and Duke Ellington School of the Arts). Efforts by school systems to address the structural inequalities created by these programs include opening enrollment up to all interested students, and grant money for school divisions to help reimburse low-income students taking AP or IB exams for a portion of the cost (Staples, 2016). However, efforts to address inequalities in the context of gifted programs for elementary-aged students are mainly focused on implementing multiple criteria for identification.

## **How are Students Identified for Gifted Education?**

As the main focus of gifted education programs throughout the U.S. is academic acceleration, identification protocols focus mainly on identifying students' potential through observation of their achievement and potential academic ability. In their 2018 meta-analysis of gifted and talented identification practices, Hodges et al. found that a majority of states across the nation implemented the use of various IQ tests, such as the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT), the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test (NNAT2), and the Raven Standard Progressive Matrices (RAVEN). Regardless of whether or not these assessments included a nonverbal component or were strictly nonverbal assessments, the authors found that the results on these assessments demonstrated large differences between white and Black, Hispanic, and Native-American students' results. As such, standardized assessments have not been successful in closing the identification gap.

### *Students' Language Proficiency*

For students who receive EL instruction, assessments that focus on academic achievement and IQ assessments such as the CogAT, NNAT2, and RAVEN pose another barrier to identification: their language is often seen as a detriment rather than an asset to their academic and intellectual ability. In many cases, students are often provided the opportunity to take an assessment in their preferred languages, but this poses an additional conundrum for students whose basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) far outweigh their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in both languages (Cummins, 2008).

## Research Question

These multidimensional issues raise many questions about equity and access to gifted education programs for multilingual students in U.S. public schools. To encompass this complexity, I pose the following research question: How are practices and policies determined to identify and select language minoritized elementary students for advanced academic services?

## SELECTION PROCEDURES AND CRITERIA

Articles for this literature review were selected in two phases: an initial exploratory phase followed by a systematic phase. In the initial exploratory phase, literature that addressed how the term *giftedness* was historically and currently defined, conceptualized, and enacted within educational spaces was reviewed. This led to sources related to educational tracking of ELs in K-12 U.S. public schools. The exploratory phase led to the development of the research question, which served to determine exclusion and inclusion criteria to guide the systematic phase of this literature review.

Four key terms were identified: *capital*, *policies*, *language minoritized students*, and *advanced academic services*. Additionally, a list of related terms was developed for advanced academic services and language minoritized students as outlined in Table 1. The list of related terms for language minoritized learners are commonly used in the field of education (Mohamed, 2023) and in the articles reviewed. Those for advanced academic services reflect types of programs that provide services for students at an academically accelerated level, as well as the programmatic structure of schools working within the greater context of student grouping within schools.

**Table 1.** List of Related Terms

<b>advanced academic services</b>	<b>language minoritized students</b>
gifted education	English Learners (ELs)
Advanced Placement (AP)	English Language Learners (ELLs)
honors	multilingual students
educational tracking	culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) learners
tracking	English as a second language (ESOL)

Combinations of keywords were used to search the George Mason University Library database, which provides query results from five major educational search engines: APA PsycInfo (EBSCO), Education Database, Education Research Complete, Science Direct, and ProQuest. As each finding allowed for the development of additional terminology, search terms expanded to include “opportunity hoarding” and “racialized tracking” to address emerging themes. In order to remain within a period of relevance, an initial time frame of ten years was identified. However, as a minimal amount of literature relevant to the research question established was identified, the timeline was expanded to include literature from the year 2000 to the present, thereby expanding the time frame of the initial search to 24 years. Additionally, one article from 1984 was included in the literature due to its foundational arguments. In total, 88 articles were identified for review.

A list of criteria was developed to determine which articles would be selected for inclusion in this annotated bibliography: (1) grade level, (2) capital type (sociocultural, linguistic, economic), (3) discussion of language minoritized students, (4) discussion of identification for services, and (5) discussion of issues related to advanced academic services. A total of three pieces of literature were determined to include all 5 criteria: an elementary school setting that addressed linguistic capital, featuring discussion of language minoritized students and issues related to identification for advanced academic services. As such, inclusion criteria were increasingly made more flexible: the inclusion of all grade levels increased the initial results to five; the inclusion of all grade levels and all types of capital increased the initial result to six; the inclusion of all grade levels, all types of capital, and the exclusion of the discussion of issues related to the identification of advanced academic services increased the initial result to 15; and so forth.

This systematic review phase of the literature review yielded 35 sources of literature that were reviewed in this literature review. Three overarching themes were identified in this process: (1) defining & conceptualizing giftedness, (2) equity & access, and (3) linguistic, sociocultural, and economic capital.

## **DEFINING AND CONCEPTUALIZING GIFTEDNESS**

The literature included in this section addresses the way in which giftedness is conceptualized in U.S. public schools and defined by its educators, policymakers, and other educational stakeholders such as students and parents. Additionally, the ways in which giftedness is

defined and conceptualized through educational and assessment practices and related identification protocols are also discussed.

### **How Giftedness is Defined**

The term gifted has been defined in multiple ways throughout the history of the United States. In a 2018 meta-analysis of 54 studies from across the nation, Hodges et al. found that the definition of what it means to be gifted is quite variable, which creates subsequent variability in identification protocols and related placement in these services (Mansfield, 2016; Peters et al., 2020). Of these protocols, the most common was the majority of states' use of traditional test scores to identify and select students for gifted education programs. The 2018 study notes that "17 states [using] IQ scores and 15 states [using] achievement scores as part of the selection criteria," but also that "20 states also reported using a multiple criteria model for their evaluation process even though they did not provide any information on the specific criteria (Hodges et al., 2018, p. 148)."

Although these traditional tests are commonly used throughout the country to place students into gifted education programs, test results have disproportionately overidentified white and affluent students, and have vastly under-identified CLED students, primarily Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students (Ford, 2011; Hendrix, 2022; Hodges et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020; Smith-Peterson, 2021). This long-term disproportionality has served to create and uphold intra-school segregation post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (Lewis & Diamond, 2015) and is deeply ingrained with the history of how giftedness has been conceptualized and defined, and consequently identified in U.S. public schools (Hendrix, 2022; Roda, 2020).

### *Identifying Giftedness in the 20th Century*

During the United States' shift towards industrialization in the early to mid-20th century, a parallel pattern can be seen within their public schools' adoption of similar approaches. Efficient methods of providing education for groups of students was at the forefront of the conversation, and the development of different learning tracks (academic and vocational) were developed so as to clearly define future roles and responsibilities of students within the greater society (Miller, 2018). Determinations of which students would be best suited for which track were made based on students' scientifically measured academic ability. These ability tests built from eugenicist ideologies in the work of prominent psychologists such as

Terman, whose revised version of the Stanford-Binet I.Q. test, like many similar ability tests, “quantified the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race (Ryan, 2020, p. 23).” His longitudinal study of over 2 million study participants exemplified this quantified white supremacy in the grouping of participants by determined mental age (or estimated cognitive abilities in comparison to those of their age group) of racial and ethnic groups. Whites were placed at the top of his list (with Anglo-Saxons at the very top), non-whites (only from the U.S.) homogenized into one category at the very bottom, and Eastern Europeans in the bottom half (Table 2). Terman’s belief in the genetic determination of IQ and its application to predictions of children’s future vocational opportunities (Warne, 2018) laid the foundation for *giftedness* as synonymous with *white* and *success*. The latter was exemplified by maintained or continuous upward social mobility, evidenced in part by access to elite schools or academic programs that served to prepare children for their role in socially elevated and wealthy professions. Further, by determining the mental age of nonwhites to be lower than whites by default due to their genetics, Terman made clear that the advanced academics necessary to access elevated levels of social and economic capital were best suited to the U.S.’s white citizens.

**Table 2.** Results of Terman’s Order of Mental Ages of Racial and Ethnic Groups (adapted from Ryan, 2020)

1.	England
2.	Holland
3.	Germany
4.	U.S. (white)
5.	Canada
6.	Norway
7.	Ireland
8.	Greece
9.	Russia
10.	Italy
11.	Poland
12.	U.S. (non-white)

### **How Giftedness is Conceptualized in Modern Educational Spaces**

Over a century later, the impact of Terman’s foundational framework of identifying ability levels can be seen in the ways in which giftedness is currently conceptualized and defined in U.S. public schools by its educators, policymakers, and other educational stakeholders (such as students and parents). In 2021, The Office of English Language Acquisition reported that less than 2% of students receiving English learning (EL) services in U.S. public schools were identified for gifted education programs. This is in spite of the dramatic increase of 0.5



million students throughout the country of students receiving EL instruction between 2010 and 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b), and an increase of over 1 million students in public elementary and secondary schools throughout the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023c).

### *The Role of Teachers' Perceptions of Giftedness in Identification*

The role of educators in the identification and placement of students in gifted education services is key, especially for ELs. In a 2020 systematic review of 50 articles related to the identification of ELs, Mun et al. found that “teachers have implicit (cultural) beliefs about giftedness and ELs that negatively influence their nomination of ELs for gifted education programs (2020: 309).” This implicit bias held by teachers is further exacerbated by the fact that most teachers’ understanding of how giftedness is characterized by ELs is often limited, with teachers relying on students’ demonstrated level of English fluency as well as academic achievement and assessment scores when making recommendations for students to be evaluated for gifted education services (Szymanski & Lynch, 2020). In doing so, ELs’ opportunities to demonstrated gifted potential and advanced ability is often overshadowed by the fact that their language skills – primarily their academic language skills – are still in development (Taggart, 2018; Umansky & Avelar, 2023).

### *Protocols and Current Practices to Help Increase Identification of CLED Students*

While many teachers hold biased views on the gifted potential of their EL students, those with positive views “showed the capacity to recognize advanced academic potential and refer them for gifted services (Szymanski & Lynch, 2020, p. 444).” Therefore, through the implementation of additional protocols and practices by schools, the potential number of ELs identified for gifted education programs could increase.

### *Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices*

Coaching and professional development would benefit teachers by demonstrating how their language and culture plays a role within a student’s demonstrated potential (Szymanski & Lynch, 2020). By providing teachers an understanding of the gifted characteristics of ELs along with a thorough understanding of the identification process (screening, nomination/referral, identification, and placement), teachers are able to become better advocates for their EL students, especially multilingual teachers (Gubbins et al., 2020). Additionally, the development of curriculum and instructional materials enable them to

“recognize and accept that cultural difference dictate making instructional modifications that are responsive to and address learning style difference (Ford, 2011, p. 193)”. Programs such as Young Scholars and Project CLUE, which aim to nurture the talent of CLED students, can increase the placement rate of ELs into gifted education programs (Mun et al., 2020).

### Universal Screening

The implementation of universal screening (also known as comprehensive screening) provides the opportunity for capturing the greatest pool of potential talent through the administration of a common ability/intelligence test, such as the Cognitive Abilities Tests (CogAT), Naglieri Nonverbal Abilities Tests (NNAT), or Raven Standard Progressive Matrices (RAVEN), to an entire grade level of students. School districts that implemented these screening practices demonstrated an increase in the number of ELs identified for further evaluation (Card & Guiliano, 2016b; Gubbins et al., 2020). Although high performance on common cognitive ability/intelligence tests may provide an opportunity for ELs whose abilities might otherwise go unrecognized, universal screening alone is often not enough to increase their placement within gifted education programs.

### Combination Rules

The CogAT is one of the most common ability/intelligence tests used for academic placement throughout schools across the nation (Gubbins et al., 2020). The test has three sections – a verbal section (verbal aptitude score), a quantitative section (quantitative aptitude score), a logic and spatial reasoning section (nonverbal aptitude score) – that are reported as individual and composite scores. In a 2018 study of a nationally stratified sample of 619 K-15 students, Lakin found that, when required to demonstrate strength in all three sections of the CogAT (what he referred to as the “AND” rule), the number of CLED students who qualified for gifted education services was significantly less than when students were required to demonstrate strength in *any* category (referred to as the “OR” rule), or even an average of all three sections (referred to as the “AVERAGE” rule). It is worth noting that, while flexible identification rules do allow for an increased number of CLED students to be identified for placement, the group average score “was almost one full IQ standard deviation (15 points) lower in ability than the AND group (p. 214).” This finding illustrates the deeply entrenched systemic issues embedded within the very history of ability/intelligence tests grounded in Terman’s work.

### Alternative Assessments

Several articles within this literature review encouraged the use of alternative assessments to identify ELs for gifted education programs (Gubbins et al., 2019; Hodges et al., 2018; Mun et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that none of the articles discussed the use of alternative assessments such as the development of academic portfolios, and almost all articles defined alternative assessments to include a nonverbal ability/intelligence assessment (e.g., the NNAT or RAVEN) or, at minimum, the nonverbal section of an ability/intelligence test (e.g., the CogAT). In this definition of alternative assessments, ELs' abilities in topics outside of logic and spatial reasoning are glossed over or, in some cases, outright ignored. Peters et al. (2020) thus raise the question of whether school systems can actually identify the right students for their existing gifted education programs “without making clear and explicit choices about who and/or what [their] gifted program is meant to [serve and] accomplish (par. 12).” They instead recommend the development of a gifted education program tailored to the needs of the students identified.

### Multiple Criteria

Through the implementation of multiple criteria (Ford, 2011; Hodges et al., 2018), school districts are able to identify students for gifted education programs with more than just test scores. The majority of schools that implement this approach make use of a defined cutoff score on an ability/intelligence test such as the CogAT or NNAT, a defined cutoff score on an achievement test such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) or the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and teacher and student self-ratings of demonstrated gifted characteristics (Gubbins et al., 2020). School districts can decide how flexible they wish to be in deciding in which and how many of these categories students must be designated as “advanced” in order to qualify for gifted education services.

### State Mandates

The few federal policies related to gifted education that do exist call for the provision of funds to school systems for program development, with a broad definition of giftedness that focuses mainly on students' academic abilities and demonstrated outcomes (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2019). As these limited policies do not outline any specific requirements for states and school districts to include gifted education services within their program offerings, it is up to individual states to create relevant policies. In a 2019 study, Peters et al., found that 42.4% of students throughout the United States did not

have access to gifted services at their schools, due to lack of state mandate. In states without a mandate to identify students for gifted education services, at least 90% of schools did not identify students for gifted education services. In comparison, in states with a mandate to identify students for gifted education services, no more than 15% of schools declined to do the same.

**Table 3.** Representation Indices (RIs) by State Mandates  
(adapted from Peters et al., 2019)

	Black	Asian	White	Latinx	Native American	EL
<b>No identification mandate</b>	0.48	2.21	1.24	0.58	0.87	0.34
<b>Identification mandate</b>	0.66	2.23	1.18	0.60	0.77	0.30
<b>No service mandate</b>	0.59	2.18	1.19	0.57	0.88	0.41
<b>Service mandate</b>	0.60	2.25	1.21	0.60	0.81	0.25

*Note: An RI of 1.0 denotes a proportional representation.*

Using information from a comprehensive analysis by Yoon and Gentry from 2009 that calculated a Representation Index (RI), or “the degree to which a certain group of students is represented in the gifted population compared with the total student population (Peters et al., 2019, p. 275),” Peters et al. were able to contrast the proportional representation of CLED students in states with or without a gifted education mandate. Although Black and Latinx students were represented in greater numbers in states that mandated the programs than in states that did not, the reverse was true of Native American and EL students. However, the representation for all of these groups was overall significantly lower than that of Asian American and white students (Table 3). Moreover, the intense variation in expectations both between and within states raises the question of how stronger federal oversight might impact not only representation of CLED students in gifted education, but also equitable access to these programs throughout the country, especially in states and localities with a larger percentage of CLED students.

## **THE ROLE OF EQUITY AND ACCESS IN INFLUENCING POLICIES**

The historical summary of how giftedness came to be defined through identification protocols, framed by eugenicist and Darwinian ideologies of the early to mid-20th century,

provides context for its conceptualization within the modern-day U.S. public school system. These foundational racist ideologies served to further situate giftedness within the current academic climate as something enacted through identification protocols, education practices, and inconsistent policy. The following section will provide a historical overview of tracking in U.S. public schools in relation to how teachers perceive ELs' academic potential and ability, and the consequent impact on CLED students' access to advanced academic programs and higher education. A discussion of a potential approach to address the existing inequalities created by academic tracking is reviewed at the end of this section.

### **A History of Tracking in Schools**

Tracking has been a part of U.S. schools since the mid-to-late 19th century with the introduction of the Common School Movement. In his 2020 book, Ryan explains that, whereas education was once only accessible and attainable to children of the wealthy and elite, common schools aimed to provide free education to the nation's children, so long as those children were white males. The goal of the common school was to create a unified nation by building an educated democracy that defined and instilled "the values and norms of a national identity (Ryan, 2020, p. 12)" necessary to be a good U.S. citizen. By 1918, school attendance was compulsory in all U.S. states for all children, regardless of sex or race. During this period of peak industrialization, teachers looked to find ways to efficiently educate increasingly large groups of students and meet their perceived academic needs.

This desire for efficiency led to the eventual introduction of high schools through the Committee of Ten, and later the introduction of vocational and academic tracks with high schools through the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. Given the popular Darwinist and eugenicist ideologies of the time, students who were not deemed an appropriate fit for the academic track (i.e., CLED students) were placed into vocational tracks, often in separate facilities. In order to determine whether students were suitable for this academic track, their abilities were evaluated through testing introduced by eugenicist psychologists such as Terman and Carl Brigham who used "science" to promote white supremacy, as previously discussed (Miller, 2018; Ryan, 2020).

#### *Limited Access to Gifted and College-Preparatory Classes*

Despite its great popularity, the practice of tracking experienced a decline in the 1930s due to evidence of its overall ineffectiveness. However, a second wave occurred following the

desegregation mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education*, with students experiencing tracking differently and “schools now [tracking] students within specific subjects (Miller, 2018, p. 910).” A student’s race and class were considered the true qualifier for participation in gifted and college-level preparatory classes, rather than their ability (Garces-Bascal & Elhoweris, 2022; Hendrix, 2022; Miller, 2018).

Throughout the nation, the representation of white student enrollment in gifted and Advanced Placement courses greatly continues to overshadow that of non-white students. In 2013-2014, 58.2% of the over 3.3 million public school students enrolled in gifted education programs were white, whereas Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students comprised between 0.9% to 18% of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, as referenced in Hendrix, 2022). Teachers’ perceptions of students’ ability play a role in this enrollment discrepancy. A 2022 study by Copur-Gencturk et al. found that teachers demonstrated a statistically significant preference to recommend male over female students for mathematics gifted education, and Black students – particularly Black boys – for special education programs. Similarly, teachers’ perceptions of ELs’ academic potential and ability impact their access to college preparatory-level courses and advanced academic or gifted education programs (Callahan, 2005, 2010; Hendrix, 2022; Umansky, 2016ab).

### *Teachers’ Perceptions of ELs’ Academic Potential and Ability*

Teachers hold implicit biases about what it means to be gifted (Mun et al., 2020), reified by assessment practices and education policies founded on a history of eugenicist ideology. Relatedly, recommendations for the most appropriate academic services for a student’s long-term success are often heavily influenced by a teacher’s perceptions of a student’s ability. Biases about students’ overall academic ability are largely determined by their gender (Copur-Gencturk, 2022), race, academic label (e.g. special education, EL, gifted, etc.), demonstrated level of English fluency, and economic status (Umansky, 2016a). These beliefs about academic ability and potential impact the way in which students are assessed for not only gifted education programming, but any academic program offered by a school (Callahan, 2005, 2010), and consequently affects how they are tracked academically throughout their K-12 education (Card & Guiliano, 2016a).

In a review of high school students’ enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which are often used as the placement goal for students enrolled in prior gifted education programming, Hendrix (2022) found that course enrollment for Black, Latinx, and

Indigenous was significantly lower, especially in schools that offered a greater variety of AP courses. For an EL student, this lack of access to such college-preparatory coursework was found to be even further limited by their designation. Schools often “translate[d] her or his LEP ELL status into limited academic aptitude, [thereby placing] her or his enrollment in engaging, challenging curriculum [...] on hold until she or he displays sufficient English proficiency (Callahan et al., 2010).” Umansky’s (2016b) study also highlights this disparate access to advanced academic coursework, with ELs in her study sample taking 2.18 to 2.5 fewer credits than their English-only peers. Additionally, and most importantly, ELs with a higher English proficiency level than their peers were “12 percentage points more likely to have an honors level class as their highest-level class (p. 1816).” Similarly, Hamilton et al. (2020) found that ELs who had been reclassified (also referred to as “exited from EL instructional programming”) in less than two years were most likely to be identified for gifted education services.

This practice of maintaining low expectations based on the language proficiency level of ELs is made increasingly apparent in Callahan’s 2005 study of 355 EL high schoolers in rural Northern California. The study found great differences in these students’ academic expectations, and therefore the grades they received, in their Beginning EL level courses versus their Advanced EL level courses, the former being the point at which ELs were transitioned into mainstream courses. The consequent poor academic performance led to less than 2% of the ELs in the study sample having enough secondary coursework to meet college-entry requirements on their transcript. Similar to Callahan’s (2005) findings, Kanno & Kangas’s 2014 qualitative study of eight 11th-grade ELs at an ethnically and linguistically diverse public high school in suburban Pennsylvania found that access to AP courses for ELs was restricted. Only four of the 46 ELL<sup>1</sup> seniors and one of 15 reclassified ELL seniors in the 2011 – 2012 school year were registered for an AP course (the former in their preferred language of AP Spanish or AP French, and the latter for AP Computer Science), in comparison to the 15.2% of seniors registered for *at least* one AP course.

In their investigation of the reasons for this difference, the researchers found that “teachers and counselors feared that the reading and writing demands of the high-track courses would overwhelm ELLs (Kanno & Kangas, p. 864),” especially with the lack of differentiated instruction (such as linguistic scaffolding) provided by teachers in high-level

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<sup>1</sup> Findings discussing access to AP courses for ELs in Kanno and Kangas (2014) uses the term ELLs. The researchers’ terms have been used in discussion of their article as these terms are related (Table 1).

courses. This would preclude ELs from accessing the curriculum delivered at an accelerated pace in an academically rigorous environment. Such instances of low expectation, however, do not begin in high school, with the negative impact of being labeled EL beginning to show on academic achievement scores as early as second grade (Umansky, 2016a). Therefore, “although ESL services may initially ensure that students’ linguistic needs are prioritized, if ESL placement is continued over time, it may undermine long-term academic achievement (Callahan et al., 2009, p. 104).”

### **Moving Forward: Discussions of Detracking**

Solutions to address systems and structures that uphold the existing disproportionality of access to college-preparatory and advanced academic courses for CLED students have been explored within the field of gifted education for several years (Ford, 2011; Mun et al., 2020; NAGC, n.d.). However, these programs do little to challenge the existing paradigm of tracking, and instead commit to the programmatic and assessment practices that have worked to exclude groups of students. Instead, researchers have explored the possibility of how restructuring this paradigm through detracking could provide the opportunity to address the problem. Roda (2020) found that, despite New York City changing their definition of giftedness to be inclusive of multiple modalities, employing universal screening practices, and redesigning and expanding existing programs, underrepresentation of Black, Latinx, and low-income students continued to be a pervasive issue in their gifted education programs. In response, Roda urges the consideration of detracking of programs to provide equitable access to advanced programming to all students.

Although more than two decades apart, Smith-Peterson’s (2021) and Oakes et al.’s (2000) investigations found a rapid and significant increase in CLED students’ academic achievement in schools that had adopted detracking programs. Similar achievement gains on statewide assessment data were found by Card & Guiliano (2016a) in all subjects for Black and Hispanic students who were placed in gifted/high-achieving cohorts, regardless of their having met the cutoff for gifted services as designated by their school district’s ability/intelligence test. These findings underscored how making advanced academic programs accessible to all students yielded positive academic outcomes for all students, thus challenging the notion that an advanced curriculum should only be accessible to students whose potential is identified through tests.



### *The Political Power of Parental Voice*

Despite increased academic achievement outcomes of CLED students in the schools in the aforementioned studies, the schools in the latter two experienced extreme pushback from upper-middle-class community members (mainly white parents) who vociferated their concerns that the new detracking programs were not providing a rigorous enough education for their children, or restricting opportunities for their own children. This made district officials feel uneasy in both cases, fearing retaliation expressed as discontinued economic support for the school system, the removal of their student(s) from the school system, a legal suit, or simply harassment. District officials' concerns were severe enough in the case of the school in Oakes et al.'s study that it ultimately led to the dissolution of the detracking program altogether.

## **HOW LINGUISTIC, SOCIOCULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC CAPITAL INFLUENCES POLICIES**

White, affluent parents are keenly aware of the power they hold in the decision-making process of education policies related to academic services. In Roda and Sattin-Bajaj (2023), parents openly shared their ability to leverage their social and economic positions to secure a space for their child in spaces they felt offered educational security, thus “perpetuating disparities in access within the existing choice system (p. 13).” The unstated need by upper-middle-class community members to remove any additional barriers to their children being able to obtain an academic competitive edge above their peers is enacted through the minimization of the cultural and linguistic wealth (Yosso, 2005) held by CLED families.

### **Linguistic Capital**

A core aspect of EL students' cultural wealth is their linguistic capital, which “includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style (Yosso, 2006, p. 78).” Although the added value of ELs' linguistic capital is demonstrated in the ways that ELs provide support for family members and their community, this added benefit does not typically translate into academic success for students in schools (Baker, 2019; Gay, 2018).

Students' access to academic programs is shaped by educators' assumptions of what are and are not acceptable modes of communication. The five East Coast, suburban middle-schoolers interviewed by Baker (2019) described several examples of ELs' demonstrations of

task-commitment, leadership through community engagement, above average understanding of a specific topic, and creative problem-solving skills. All are components of giftedness according to Renzulli, as outlined in his Three Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 2005). However, in all cases, their heritage language abilities were not valued, or their multilingualism was assumed to be a deficit to their academic knowledge and ability by their teachers. Access to leadership groups and advanced mathematics courses was instead preferentially extended to English proficient students who were already demonstrating achievement through appropriate coursework and afterschool commitments.

### **Opportunity Hoarding and the Commodification of Language**

Such limitation of opportunities for CLED students as a consequence of opportunity hoarding are especially common in AP courses and gifted education programs, wherein there exists a cap to the number of students that can be enrolled within a program. This creates spaces of intraschool segregation, such as in the case of Riverview High School, wherein white and affluent students made up almost 90% of its AP course classes and nearly 80% of its honors classes, despite the fact that less than 50% of the student body was white (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Teachers' lack of culturally relevant pedagogical knowledge (Gay, 2018), in tandem with their implicit biases, led to the homogenization of their nonwhite students and a consequent negative impact on those students' academic outcomes and opportunities.

Additionally, some language minority teachers expressed feeling pressure from the parents of their affluent white students to assure placement for their children in the limited spaces for AP or honors programming. The lack of such similar pressure from the parents of CLED students allowed them to feel it acceptable to not advocate harder for those students' placement within more challenging courses. This pressure on teachers was well understood by the affluent white parents, who simultaneously expressed a general concern for the lack of nonwhite representation in their children's classes, but only due to the fact that it would limit their ability to truly engage in a truly diverse educational experience (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This was especially apparent in the demands that their children be placed in advanced coursework if they felt they had wrongly been placed in general education courses, where classes were not as homogenously affluent and white. Their desire to commodify CLED students' cultural wealth for the benefit of their own children's future success, while continuing to deny CLED students access to the same opportunities, is supported by the sociohistorical context of the development of local language policies.

In a number of the previously discussed studies (Card & Guiliano, 2016ab; Hamilton et al., 2020; Kanno & Kangas, 2014; Umansky, 2016b; Umansky & Avelar, 2023) and in the case of Riverview High, students' linguistic capital was not seen as a resource on which to build upon unless there was some way to commodify it or have it serve the interest of the dominant group: affluent white families (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Rather, their language was seen as analogous with social problems (e.g., poverty, low educational achievement, limited social mobility, etc.) and something to overcome (Ruiz, 1984; Schmidt, 2020). Under this existing system of whiteness serving as the standard to which all other students are to be compared, the terms 'gifted' and 'ability' have become synonymous with whiteness (Stark, 2014) and having "parents with more social capital [who] are able to ensure their children are placed in higher tracks with access to the best opportunities (Miller, p. 911)."

### **Decentering Whiteness**

By continuing to center the demands of white families for elite access for their children, by treating white children's academic achievement scores as the baseline and Anglophone countries as standard, researchers and policymakers will continue to perpetuate the existing disproportionalities within gifted education. To challenge this stance of whiteness as a 'norm', Garces-Bascal & Elhoweris (2022) suggest the adoption of critical whiteness theory, which examines the role of whiteness as a social construct and its impact on social, political, economic, and cultural behavior, as a framework for future research within the field. By decentering whiteness as the norm in gifted education, researchers can center the unique needs of CLED students. For example, when research is conducted about ELs in gifted education, oftentimes they are homogenized as one group. However, the needs of emergent ELs (those just beginning to learn English, often because they have just arrived from a non-English speaking country) differ from long-term ELs (designated as ELs for more than six years), exited ELs (no longer receiving EL services), and current ELs (actively receiving EL instruction). By decentering whiteness, the intersectional experiences of CLED students can be more thoroughly and better researched to provide better next steps for defining policies, protocols, and practices for their increased identification in gifted education programming.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The literature review shows multiple sociocultural variables that influence policies that determine the identification of language minoritized students for advanced academic services.

## **A Foundation of Racism**

Although definitions of giftedness are varied, the term's historical roots continue to impact the way in which it is conceptualized in current educational spaces. Terman's ranking of mental ability as demonstrated by the results of his foundational intelligence tests are laden with eugenicist, racist, and social Darwinist ideology (Ryan, 2020). Although his test is no longer used to determine a student's aptitude, it has been a blueprint for current assessments used by a majority of states in the U.S. as a necessary protocol for the identification and placement of students for gifted education services (Mansfield, 2016; Peters, 2020). Furthermore, the work of Terman and others has helped develop the foundation for tracking in education in U.S. public education and influenced the way that giftedness has come to be conceptualized within the field (Hendrix, 2022; Roda, 2020).

## **The Role of Educator Perceptions & Expectation Bias**

As teachers are most often the ones to refer students for evaluation, their perceptions of giftedness play a significant role in the identification and placement process. Many teachers are influenced by the knowledge they have accrued through personal and professional educational experience, in teacher education programs and professional development, and even by how giftedness is discussed in the public and portrayed in the media. Being that CLED students demonstrate giftedness differently from what has come to be the standard defined by whiteness, many K-12 U.S. public school teachers – a vast majority of whom are white women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a) – often have a limited understanding of what gifted characteristics to look for when assessing them. Similarly, school district identification protocols and policies echo this lack of understanding, continuing instead to conflate low levels of English fluency with low levels of intelligence, reinforced by ELs' generally lower performance on standardized assessments compared to their non-EL peers.

Relatedly, educators' low expectations of ELs' academic ability and performance create situations in which those students' access to English language development coursework, wherein students experience high grade inflation at the emergent stages of English fluency, and consequently access to advanced academic programs with much more rigorous evaluation protocols, become exceptionally limited. By limiting EL students to courses that focus more on language development and less on content (if at all), the possibility of overlooking exceptional or above average academic potential becomes common.

### **The Role of Capital**

Access to capital plays an integral role in the policies that impact CLED students' access to academic programs. Students whose families have great levels of economic and social capital will be able to leverage their resources (e.g., knowledge of the educational system, personal and professional connections) to hoard opportunities for themselves and their children, thus exacerbating intra-school segregation. Students with higher levels of linguistic capital as demonstrated by English fluency will have more opportunity to be placed into advanced courses or gifted programming, whereas students with low levels of linguistic capital are most often placed into classes that limit their access to the coursework necessary to prepare them for post-secondary education. For economically disadvantaged ELs, taking longer than their more affluent EL peers to develop English proficiency, this could mean that their access to college-preparatory coursework is nearly nonexistent in comparison. This is of particular concern as nearly 40% of ELs in the U.S. live in poverty (Quintero & Hansen, 2021).

### **Recommendations to Address Entrenched Biases**

To address these entrenched biases, teacher training programs could center culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2018) that would shift educators' view of their ELs' multilingualism as a deficit to their learning to that of an asset. Further, the adoption of such teaching practices would create more accessible and inclusive learning spaces for all learners, a limitation found to be especially present in advanced and secondary grade coursework (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). In tandem with culturally responsive teaching practices, the detracking academic programs by school systems would create access to advanced academic coursework for all students.

### **CONCLUSION**

The existing disproportionality of CLED students' representation in gifted education programs has long challenged educators and education policymakers as they work to develop and implement policies, programs, and other solutions to create equitable access for all students. Through an exploration of ways that giftedness has been, and continues to be, defined and conceptualized in educational spaces, as well as how sociocultural variables influence the policies that impact opportunities for language minoritized students in U.S. public schools, this literature review aimed to answer the following research question: How are practices and policies determined for the identification of language minoritized elementary students for advanced academic services?

## Findings

The findings of this review illustrate how linguistic capital – centered on students' demonstrated and perceived level of English proficiency – plays a critical role in accessing advanced academic services such as gifted education programming. In reviewing the history of gifted education within the context of U.S. public schools, the racist ideology underlying practices for identifying the gifted has laid the foundation for excluding CLED students from elite academic programming that provides access to increased capital. The implementation and upholding of barriers, therefore, serves to uphold an unspoken societal caste system that exists within U.S. society, in which those who hold linguistic capital (in addition to other forms) are welcome to have access to and participate in all levels of society and schooling, including advanced academic programming. Thus, while policymakers and educators have aimed at addressing the existing inequality, their efforts through local policies, protocols, and practices to increase the disproportionately low number of CLED students in gifted education programs have continued to show limited overall success.

## Limitations


Although the original intent of this research was to focus the discussion on elementary gifted education programs, of the 36 works reviewed, only six (17%) explicitly stated that their work addressed children in this bracket. As such, the search criteria had to be broadened to include grades K-12 due to the limited number of available finds related to the topic. Similarly, while there exists a plethora of literature addressing the disproportionate representation of CLED students in gifted education, a limited quantity of it relates to the role of language. Of the 36 works reviewed, only 10 (27%) discussed the role of language in the identification of CLED students for gifted education to some degree (i.e., without discussing or addressing levels of English proficiency), and only three (8%) did so directly. Related to this limitation is the type of available literature based on where one stands on the discourse surrounding the role of gifted education in today's academic reality. Much of the literature maintaining the position that the system needs to be challenged and transformed, as this paper does, is comprised of critical positionality pieces. 13 of the 36 (36%) works in this literature review are books, commentary pieces, or positionality pieces; one (3%) is a dissertation; three (8%) are systematic reviews and meta-analyses; and 19 (53%) are research studies. As such, there exists a need for more research studies on this topic. Further, within the last category, the majority (12, or 63%) were quantitative studies, one (5%) was a mixed methods study, and the remainder (six, or 32%) were qualitative studies.

### Future Directions for Research

The findings of this literature review indicate a need for more research studies – especially those adopting qualitative or mixed methods approaches – focused on the role of language and linguistic capital in the identification of ELs in elementary education settings. Specifically, it is important to understand how the families of ELs conceptualize the notion of giftedness differently from the school systems their children attend, in order to decenter whiteness as norm. Without some level of agreement between the families of ELs and school systems in how giftedness is characterized and identified, and how gifted students should be nurtured and educated, disproportionalities will continue to exist, as schools will continue to operate on existing notions of giftedness.

Additionally, there seems to be a need to advocate for the adoption of a uniform set of principles to define a common vision and policy mandates at a national level, while also allowing for decentralized implementation accountability, with necessary degrees of flexibility for states and localities in developing and determining identification protocols and programmatic structures. Reviewing the history of bilingual education in the U.S. could provide beneficial guidance as to what steps to take, through lessons learned from its development into a federally mandated requirement.

### THE AUTHOR

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**APPENDIX**

**Connecting Themes and Literature Included in Review**

	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Theme 1: Defining &amp; Conceptualizing Giftedness</b>	<b>Theme 2: Equity &amp; Access</b>	<b>Theme 3: Linguistic, Socio-economic, &amp; Economic Capital</b>
1	Baker	2019			X
2	Callahan	2005		X	
3	Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller	2010		X	
4	Callahan, Wilkinson, Muller, & Frisco	2009		X	X
5	Card, & Guiliano (a)	2016		X	X
6	Card, & Guiliano (b)	2016	X		X
7	Copur-Gencturk, Thacker, & Cimpian	2022		X	
8	Ford	2011	X		
9	Garces-Bascal, & Elhoweris	2022		X	

10	Gay	2018			X
11	Gubbins, Siegle, Peters, Carpenter, Hamilton, McCoach, Puryear, Langley, & Long	2020	X		X
12	Hamilton, Long, McCoach, Hemmler, Siegle, Newton, Gubbins, Callahan, Jolly, & Robins	2020		X	X
13	Hendrix	2022		X	
14	Hodges, Tay, Maeda, & Gentry	2018	X		
15	Kanno, & Kangas	2014		X	X
16	Lakin	2018	X		
17	Lewis, & Diamond	2015			X
18	Mansfield	2016			X
19	Martinello	2008			X
20	Miller	2018		X	
21	Mun, Hemmler, Langley, Ware, Gubbins, Callahan, McCoach, Siegle, Jolly, & Robins	2020	X	X	

22	Oakes, Hunter Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton	2000		X	
23	Peters, Carter, & Plucker	2020	X		
24	Peters, Gentry, Whiting, & McBee	2019	X		
25	Roda	2020		X	
26	Roda, & Sattin-Bajaj	2023			
27	Ruiz	1984			X
28	Ryan	2020		X	X
29	Schmidt	2000			X
30	Smith-Peterson	2021	X		X
31	Stark	2014			X
32	Szymanski, & Lynch	2020	X		
33	Taggart	2018	X		

34	Umansky (a)	2016	X		X
35	Umansky (b)	2016		X	X
36	Umansky, & Avelar	2023	X		X